

SPENSER AND THE METAPHOR OF SIGHT

by Kathleen Williams

That Spenser is a poet who makes much use of visual imagery, and that, in slightly different terms, he is a "pictorial" poet, is certainly not in need of documentation. But for several centuries readers and critics have been trying to see what we mean by such statements. Over the years, the sense or senses in which "Spenser is a visual poet" have been intended have changed with our critical stances and our knowledge of the thinking of Spenser's own day, and in the present century some of the most important critical books on his poetry have been in one way or another concerned with such senses. Rosemund Tuve and C. S. Lewis both demonstrated that Spenser uses visual effects in a highly functional way, and various critics have made good use of developments in understanding of the meanings of Renaissance painting and emblem books. Very recently, a book has been devoted to Spenser and literary pictorialism, and another to the place of pictorial concepts in Sidney's *Apology* as well as in Sidney's own practice.¹ My intention in this essay is to examine some of the various issues relating to poetry and seeing which have been investigated by these and other writers, and to suggest that there is a number of ways in which the metaphor of sight is (as such a metaphor should surely be) illuminating to Spenser's work. Vision, in several senses, has long seemed a key to the poetry, and this is perhaps most explicit, and most suggestive of Spenser's correlation of poetry and vision, in the sixth book of *The Faerie Queene*.² But there are subsidiary uses too of this pervasive image.

In certain ways, of course, Spenser as a writer of the more ambitious kind of Renaissance poem must almost inevitably make much use of the visual. Sight, the most immediate and insistent of the senses, that by which during all our waking hours we relate to the world and which dominates even our dreams, is the sense to which poetic imagery most commonly appeals; and in narrative poetry, as so much of Spenser's is, visual description of persons, places, and actions is inescapable. Moreover Spenser's persons and places are, especially in *The Faerie Queene*, themselves images, or perhaps more accurately are part of one vast and complexly articulated image, as he appears to be telling us in his phrase "a continued allegory, or darke conceit." That the poem is unmistakably a metaphor for what the poet thinks living

is like and is for, as Faeryland is by his own admission a metaphor for Britain (or perhaps we would wish to say rather a metaphor for the poet's sense of what the concept "Britain" means), did not prevent critics in the past from concentrating on visual interest as an end in itself; it was the now notorious inadequacy of that position that Rosemund Tuve was showing up in relation not only to Spenser but to Elizabethan literature in general. But apart from this general use not only visual imagery, but the idea of sight, operates metaphorically in various ways in Spenser and elsewhere. The remarkable developments in our understanding of the Florentine Neoplatonists and of the artists who were their contemporaries have enabled us to see some of the philosophic implications that existed for Renaissance painters and poets in the concept of sight.

Seeing is obviously the most common of all metaphors for understanding,³ and it has become so much a part of our mental apparatus that in our everyday speech it is scarcely felt as a metaphor at all. To consider a vivid mental experience of understanding in terms of the most vivid and immediate of the senses is natural, but in Plato particularly, and in those who followed Plato both in the classical world and later, it existed not only as a natural term of common speech but as a term of philosophy. Ficino particularly is fascinated by the things "seeing" can mean. "We know," says E. H. Gombrich, "that Ficino attached much importance to the power of sight," and that he praised "the sublimity of visual beauty as a symbol of Divine splendour."⁴ Sight was, properly used, the noblest of the senses, but misused it could, like all the noblest of things, lead to the markedly ignoble. It is possible to regard visual beauty as by no means a symbol of divine splendor; this is a thing of constant concern to Platonist love poets, including Spenser, who puzzles over it in the *Fowre Hymnes*. Plato himself, as they well knew, recognized that it was possible to confuse a symbolic seeing with a merely sensuous one, and was suspicious of art as a result; and much Renaissance poetry presents a modern reader with problems of interpretation where sensuous and intellectual meanings are difficult to separate or to relate.

A theory of intellectual sight raises, consequently, a number of interrelated issues, and several familiar themes of Renaissance literature may be connected at that center. Art and nature, and their relation to one another; the nature and art particularly of poetry; *ut pictura poesis*; the nature of love and its relation to physical desire; all these and others have connections with the relations of inner and outer, intellectual and sensory, seeing. Does, in this vitally important matter, the greater build upon the lesser, or control it, or ignore it? Spenser is as interested in the network of meanings as is Sidney, whose apologia for poetry is based upon

the assumption that the objects of artistic imitation are not the individual impressions derived from sensation but concepts both formed and viewed within the mind. The poet represents ideas with words; the painter does the same thing with pictures. . . . The word

and line are merely the media through which more perfect truths may be seen. As John Hoskyns was to put it, "the concepts of the minde are pictures of things and The tongue is Interpreter of those pictures."⁵

We see a brazen world, the poet delivers a golden; and the difference between the two is a matter of inner vision, which transforms the outer. A fool sees not the same tree that a wise man sees, and the poet is the man who has the gift of showing us in words his own wise vision. He can present to us in descriptive words the essential tree, in a visual image which is, and is not, an image of the tree we see with our eye of sense. So does the painter picture for us not Lucretia as she looked to Tarquin's physical eye, but the nature and meaning of all that the virtuous and brave Lucretia was, made visible in a woman.

Visual images, then, are to Renaissance philosophers and literary theorists—as to Renaissance mages—things of immense power whether for good or ill; a heavy responsibility rests upon the artist in words, in paint, in magic. Bodily sight can be the most tyrannous of the senses, blinding us to all but the overwhelming impressions that crowd upon us, but this very insistence and inescapable vividness makes sight at once the source of our most telling images and itself the most appropriate image of inner visions, if we look through, not with, the eye and so are "by sensible impressions not enthralled" and able to live "in a world of life." It is not surprising that, for all the lapse of time and the changes in thought, Blake and Wordsworth should come to mind. The poet must be concerned with this most potent of all instruments. And nearer to Spenser and Sidney there is Milton, who had urgent reason to reconsider sight as physical fact, as source of images, as metaphor, and to remake traditional thoughts of it in his own terms and to meet his own terrible necessity. In the great invocation to holy light he prays that since now wisdom is "at one entrance quite shut out" he may, like blind Thamyris and blind Maeonides, be given inward eyes:

So much the rather thou Celestial light
Shine inward, and the mind through all her powers
Irradiate, there plant eyes, all mist from thence
Purge and disperse, that I may see and tell
Of things invisible to mortal sight.

(*Paradise Lost*, III, 51-55)

That poet and prophet may be thus compensated for loss of sight, or that blindness may, by saving us from the tyranny of the eye, open new vision to us, is one ancient aspect of the tradition of sight; one of the several interpretations of the blind Cupid, in the Renaissance, is similar, and Spenser, though he does not make much of the Miltonic concern, does hint at it in *An Hymne of Heavenly Love* and elsewhere.

Yet Spenser is close to his greatest follower in that, from beginning to end of his poetic career, he writes as one describing a sight revealed to him. One

might characterize him as a poet deeply concerned, through all his days, to see more clearly the things he is shown, and to train the reader to see more clearly in poetry as an analogue to seeing more clearly outside it. "The mind," says Giarda, "is the eye of the soul,"⁶ and the eye of the body has to be cleared by that inward sight if it is ever really to see. If all but prophetic poets have to see with the bodily eye in order to see with the mind, the reverse is equally true. "As a man is, so he sees,"⁷ and by the same token as a man sees, so he is. Of all the senses, sight is that to which Spenser refers most frequently. The poet sees, and exhorts the reader to see; characters in *The Faerie Queene* see or fail to see, concepts and emotions are made visible to the mind, speaking pictures. His own account of the mind is not only itself a picture, an image, it is a picture of a place stocked with images. In Alma's house in the book of Temperance, perhaps the most concerned with the eye of all the books of *The Faerie Queene*, two of the chambers of the mind are "dispaigned" or "painted faire" with things that are, or are not. The third chamber, where memories of the past are stored, draws on the tradition of the wise blind man, for Eumnestes is "an old old man, halfe blind" (II, ix, 55), but more than recompensed by the lively vigor of his mind. In his chamber there are no longer pictures but records; rolls, books, scrolls hang everywhere. Memory is an important part of Spenser's historical romance, as he frequently reminds us, but ancient memory can no longer give us visible pictures of the past. To give a striking and a living shape to the written records of Eumnestes is, as Sidney would have agreed, one of the tasks of the poet "historiall." There is, of course, nothing unusual in Spenser's notion of the parts of the mind, or of its being stocked with images; but that it is so lively bodied forth here, with an individual emphasis that involved the denying of pictured walls to Eumnestes, suggests that he has given it some thought.

While *The Faerie Queene* is the most impressive example of Spenser's interest in seeing, the minor poems provide evidence of his concern with the metaphor throughout his poetic life, and a glance at some of them may lead us the more easily into the longer work. *The Shepheards Calender*, for instance, develops in its own strenuous terms the old conceit of pastoral poetry by which the shepherd and the natural world respond to each other with rain and tears, sunshine and laughter. Colin, expressing his final failure as lover and poet, his final despair, in the December eclogue, puts it in visual terms that, in the context of a pastoral which has shown itself so deeply concerned with the poet's vision and his responsibility to it, can only be to us a metaphor for poetic achievement and failure. Once the untroubled and productive Colin, the fine poet of the Aprill and November eclogues, saw the honey bee, symbol since Virgil of the happily creative life, working her "formall rowmes" as the poet his stanzas; now when he looks about him he sees corruption, ugliness, decay, and he has no more formal rooms like Aprill and November to shape, only broken laments, farewells to poetry and to all life.

Where I was wont to seeke the honey bee,
 Working her formall rowmes in wexen frame,
 The grieslie todestoole growne there mought I se,
 And loathed paddocks lording on the same:
 And where the chaunting birds luld me a sleepe,
 The ghastlie owle her grievous ynnne doth keepe.
 (December, 67-72)

Yet even in November he has been able to assert that what he sees with the bodily eye may be transformed by a vision instructed by faith and courage. He has contemplated Dido's body, brought to be given back to the earth,

Yet saw I on the beare where it was brought.
 O heavie herse!
 (November, 161-162)

But he sees too a higher sight:

I see thee, blessed soule, I see,
 Walke in Elisian fieldes so free.
 O happy herse!
 (178-180)

Again in July the argument between Thomalin and Morrell turns upon the interpretation, by the eye of the mind, of such apparently straightforward sights as hills and plains. Looking at the physical phenomenon of height, that on a hill one is raised up, Morrell interprets the hill in a crassly simple and materialistic style. Thomalin, more instructed in a less sensuous tradition, knows that a hill's significance includes not only its height but the human and divine meanings associated with it. All hills may look the same to the bodily eye, but to the inner sight they may be greatly different.

Other minor poems handle the metaphor of sight rather differently. Several of them are vision poems; not only those whose titles imply as much but *The Ruines of Time* and *The Teares of the Muses* are structured on the appearance to the poet of a concept made visible. In *The Ruines of Time* nothing of Verlame appears to the sight, any more than visual remains appear in the chamber of Eumnestes. There now exists of the city "no memorie,/ Nor anie little moniment to see" (4-5). What appears is the idea to which Verlame, like Rome or Babylon, contributes, that of the inevitable decay of cities and civilizations, the vanity and mutability of all the things of men, which live only in "wise wordes taught in numbers for to runne,/ Recorded by the Muses" (402-403). Verlame and its meaning exist only in ancient documents, in which survives the memory of the race, and that memory is given vitality and power for us by the poet's vision not of things and events but of their meaning, expressed in "pregnant images of life." "Cambden, the nourice of antiquitie" is similarly praised as a lantern enabling later ages to "see the light of simple veritie" buried under the meaningless chaos of ruined stone, and the whole poem is a succession of

"spectacles"—I saw, there appeared, then did I see—which in striking images enforce the same idea

That all is vanitie and grieve of minde,
Ne other comfort in this world can be,
But hope of heaven, and heart to God inclinde.
(583-585)

The likeness of such poems to the emblem tradition has often been remarked, but others are equally concerned, sometimes in more sophisticated ways, with sight. *Prothalamion*, one of Spenser's most brilliantly original poems, presents to the troubled poet a vision which is a visual projection of his thoughts, a merging of the actual and the symbolic, women and swans, which brings him comfort as a "seeing" of promise for the future. *Epithalamion* describes an imagined scene, the perfection of all weddings, as it happens, with repeated "Look," "lo."

The love sonnets are perhaps more conventionally visual than the marriage poems (though of course their conventionality does not mean that they do not deal with matters of deep concern to Spenser; the same images recur elsewhere). A Renaissance sonneteer with Spenser's natural tendency to Neoplatonism was committed almost by definition to the familiar Platonic metaphors of sight. The lady can be seen more truly in her lover's heart than in her looking-glass, as Britomart sees Artegall's true being in Venus's mirror. As in *Epithalamion*, the most lovely of sights is "that which no eyes can see, / The inward beauty of her lively spright" (85-86). Yet is the lover's sight always clearer than that of the uncommitted stranger, and may it be in some fashion unrealistic, illusory, to suppose that it is? One of the most charming of the *Amoretti*, xvi, shows awareness in both lover and lady of the danger involved. What the lover seems to see may be only self-indulgence, illusion (a word Spenser uses). "Through sweet illusion of her lookes delight" he is able to see legions of little loves flying along the line of her sight, one of them with arrow aimed at his heart, and he is saved only by what Professor Martz has finely perceived to be a wink. The lady deliberately breaks what she knows to be an amusing illusion by laughing at it. With the sensible humourousness which characterizes her for all her coquettishness, she is aware that she is not as numinously powerful, as irresistibly glorious, as her lover likes to fancy; and she foils his determination to see her so "with twinkle of her eye."

An Hymne in Honour of Love considers the source of such metaphors as these, the Neoplatonic theory of love; and here Spenser develops more fully the subtle distinctions and relations of inner and outer sight. Love brings about an interaction between the mind and the person physically seen, each being "refyned" in the process. But as in *Amoretti*, there is a sharp sense of the ambiguity of the lover's sight. If what he sees the beloved to be is in a manner more real than that which others see, in another way it is less real, is

illusion, though illusion at one level may well be the condition for the seeing of truth at another. For example

His harts enshrined saint, his heavens queene,
Fairer then fairest, in his fayning eye,
Whose sole aspect he counts felicitye.
(215-217)

From the lively sight of earthly love, which sees things invisible to others, we proceed in *Heavenly Love* to a devotion which has raised itself still higher towards the truth. It is the power of this love that can enable us to "see those admirable things" in love's true realm of heaven, "Farre above feeble reach of earthly sight," yet the metaphor for the knowledge of God is still that of seeing. The "pure sighted eye" of love will learn at last to see the divine light which dazes the fleshly senses, "Blinding the eyes and lumining the spright" (*An Hymne of Heavenly Love*, 280). It is an experience of this kind that the physical blinding of Milton and of Saint Paul metaphorically expresses. *Heavenly Beautie* has a different though equally traditional emphasis: the things of this world may themselves (as in the case of romantic love) bring about a refining of the sight if they are looked upon with awareness that in their beauty is dimly seen the beauty of their creator.

The meanes, therefore, which unto us is lent,
Him to behold, is on his workes to looke
(*An Hymne of Heavenly Beautie*, 127-128)

and thus enlighten our blinded souls, rising in contemplation to fix our cleared eyes on "that bright sunne of Glorie." It is the poet's intention, he tells us, to "picture" for us thus the mysteries of divine Sapience, and these sights compared with which all else is "fayned shadowes."

So partial a survey of the minor poems can deal only inadequately with Spenser's use of sight, but it may suggest something of the metaphor's omnipresence and its variety even outside his greatest poem. And in *The Faerie Queene* its scope understandably is even wider. In the prefatory *Letter* the poem's intention to make concepts visible as living beings, images of life, is implicit. "So in the person of Prince Arthure I sette forth magnificence in particular," and nowhere is the nature and being of magnificence made more superbly and exquisitely present to our inner sight than in the fine description of the prince at his first appearance in Book I, canto vii, where the choice of visual detail reveals to us exactly the power, the delicacy, the sensitivity and humility and joy of what magnificence looks like to Spenser. Arthur's quest itself depends, we are told in the *Letter*, on a kind of seeing: he has "seene, in a dream or vision the Faery Queen" and his life is now devoted to seeking that sight again. The ambiguous phrase "dream or vision," subjective fancy or objective revelation, is typical of Spenser's way. Like his creator, Arthur is not certain in what sense Gloriana was "there," was "real," yet the power of such a sight is enough to absorb his life. Perhaps such distinctions as

"subjective" and "objective," "inner" and "outer," do not themselves correspond to any reality at all.

Not surprisingly, the first book begins with a picture as precisely envisioned by the poet as is the later one of Arthur. We are to look upon the strangely accoutered Knight in his bright and colored outlines, and to interpret his nature, his significance, from what we see, sharpening the inner sight upon the outer. The nature of fallen man, seeking to regain his lost self and lost world, is "sette forth" in the visual detail of Red Crosse. From this point, the legend of Holinesse develops into one of the books of the poem which makes most use of sight. In his first test, Red Crosse overestimates his power of clear sight. His own virtue, he supposes, is great enough to give him light to see by in Error's cave, but there is only "A little glooming light, much like a shade" (i, 14) cast by his armor. And there immediately follow more disastrous proofs of Red Crosse's poor sight, his inability really to see what he looks at. The events in Archimago's house are consistently presented in terms of this fatal lack. We are alerted to it in the appearance of Archimago: "simple in shew," "sober he seemde," "And often knockt his brest as one that did repent" (I, 29). "Shew" is what Red Crosse, like all men, is faced with, and his task, difficult but essential, is to be able to see when the "shew" corresponds to reality and when it does not. Archimago's power, as critics have noted, comes into his own when people are asleep and cannot see physically at all, and when they are largely at the mercy of the sights presented to the dreaming self. In dream, the distinction between Archimago's "false shewes" and reality is even harder to perceive than in a waking state; and the shows are used to abuse Red Crosse's fantasy, confusing his emotions and thus his perceptions, so that he dreams of lust, and it seems to him that Una comes to his bed. Awake, he at once sees the false Una again, bent upon a seduction which his dreams have made him more ready to believe in. He sees, awake, what is "really" before him; yet it is wholly an illusion he could have, as we say, seen through, if his outer sight of Una had been more fully instructed by his inner sight of her being and nature. The false Una, begging for his love, appropriately refers to "the blind god" who has sent her to him, and finally Red Crosse leaves with his eye of reason blinded by rage. The blindness of anger makes him equally insensible to the reality of Duessa, whom he accepts eagerly in his desire to blot out both Una and his own sensuality from his sight. Meeting Duessa, he is anxious to be deluded, and it is made plain that the fault is his own, that he is still deliberately if unconsciously blinding the eye of reason. He looks at Duessa with the devouring eager gaze of sensuality, choosing to see only her outward beauty and not to hear the dubious tale which should have made him cautious of her inner reality and alerted his rational powers.

More busying his quicke eies, her face to view,
Then his dull cares, to heare what shee did tell
(ii, 26)

So Duessa replaces Una, and the eye of sense is strengthened to his downfall. The meaning is emphasized in the meeting with Fradubio, an earlier victim of Duessa. In his case too the inner sight of reason, faith, and love was confused by an appeal to the sensual eye, so that he began to doubt and as a result lost all his senses and became a tree, though a tree which because it sees (without eyes) the truth it has betrayed, can suffer and bleed.

One can continue to list examples of the emphasis on moral and spiritual sight: the eternal night of superstition in which blind Corceca lives; the shield of Arthur which causes to fade "all that was not such as seemd in sight" and which can blind the wicked; the training of Red Crosse, by Heavenly Contemplation, to look along the steep little path that "led his vew" to the heavenly city, and enables him to distinguish between its glory and the lesser, but still true, glory of Gloriana's Cleopolis. It is the greatest of all sights, but its brightness dazzles his earthly sense, and it is difficult for him to see again the things of this world. But he must learn nonetheless to see worldly reality in the light of that clear and ultimate vision. He is never granted that sight again. Even at his betrothal to Una, the angelic hierarchies are only heard singing, not seen. And at a level below that of the potential saint, but at a level nonetheless of value—that of human goodwill—Spenser can still, after the exaltation of the vision of the New Jerusalem, write with humorous affection of the simple, anxious people whose fear for themselves and still more for their children causes them to see with the eye of sense what is not there to see, the moving eyes of the dead dragon.

Books I and II, as A. C. Hamilton some years ago demonstrated, are parallel; not surprisingly therefore Book II also deals much in sight as a way of presenting the failures and successes of the man who strives for temperance. But like the whole of Book II this theme runs parallel to, but is not identical with, that in Book I. Right seeing is essentially the same in both, but holiness and temperance afford different aspects of that essential truth. The proem to the second book is one of the most interesting of all Spenser's introductory passages, for it holds in suspension many of the ambiguities of the seeing of sense and the seeing of intellect and their relationships, and hints further at the seeing of poetry, which is to become central in the legend of Courtesy. The proem turns upon the meanings of "see" and the meanings of "real." Some, the poet confesses to the sovereign to whom the whole poem is addressed, will think this history a narrative of fantasy, "painted forgery." But in fact it is true history, "matter of just memory," coming, to use the poet's own terms in canto ix, not from the chamber of Phantastes but from that of the ancient and responsible Eumnestes. The poet creates a fiction, a speaking picture, by which the written scrolls of memory can be made visual and so more immediately vivid and affecting, and the truth be made manifest to our sight. Much exists that we do not see with the eye of sense. "Or fruitfulest Virginia who did ever vew?" Yet they existed, unseen and unknown.

Why then should witlesse man so much misweene,
 That nothing is, but that which he hath seene?
 (Proem, 3)

That is Mutability's error, the refusal to guide sensuous seeing by intellectual, the reduction of sight to an automatic and material sense:

But what we see not, who shall us persuade?
 (VII, vii, 49)

The ordinary man's sense is "too blunt and bace" to see what is there unless the poet, like a hound, shows the way ("In these strange waies, where never foote did use,/ Ne none can find, but who was taught them by the Muse," says the poet in the Proem to Book VI). Only by seeing what the poet has seen and can show to us, the land of Faery, can we really see the realm of Elizabeth. Imaginative response to the poem is a way of seeing what England is and could be, in a way that the fleshly eye can not. Fiction, images, are required to reveal to the inner sight the true, or potentially true, nature of England, as the true being of Elizabeth must be veiled in shadows of fiction to become visible.

Guyon, though he has much still to learn and to endure, knows at the beginning the basic facts about seeing. When in the first canto he looks upon the dead Amavia, he interprets her life and death immediately as a visible image of the human condition. He invites the palmer to look, not upon a dead woman, but upon that image:

Then turning to his palmer, said: "Old syre,
 Behold the ymage of mortalitie,
 And feeble nature cloth'd with fleshly tyre."
 (i, 57)

Similarly the brilliant picture of Belpheobe raises issues of seeing. She is less easy for us to interpret as an image than Amavia was for Guyon. That she is noble, aspiring, and pure is plain enough, but what else she may be is hard to know by looking at her. "All good and honour might herein be red," indeed; but words fused into a visual image can embrace complexity where the word as statement cannot. In looking, we recognize Belpheobe's sensuous appeal as well as her militant chastity. We see her flowing hair sprinkled with flowers, and like the poet we do not know why the flowers are there, "whether art it were, or heedelesse hap" (iii, 30). It is a question of what it is that we see, and if we are wise we wait, suspend judgment. Braggadocchio, of course, does not wait and does not even see the complexity. He sees selectively what he wants to see, a desirable woman alone in the forest, and he hears in the same way. Like Braggadocchio, or like Red Crosse in his own context, Phedon in canto iv sees what is not there through the effect of his own emotions. Seeing Pryene, he thinks in his jealousy that he sees Claribell, and the result is murder.

When the legend of Temperance is dealing with those temptations to sensual indulgence and ease that culminate in the Bower of Bliss, the eye is still more obviously the ruling metaphor. Phaedria, Acrasia's servant, feeds Cymochles' eyes and senses with false delights and pleasures vain (vi, 14), and reduces him to languorousness and sleep. Her mistress does the same with Verdant, and when her victims have thus wilfully blinded their inner sight through distortion of the outer she reduces them to what they have in effect become, beasts in whom the eye of reason can no longer see at all. Outside the Bower, the most impressive use of the metaphor of sight, and one already finely discussed by Spenser scholars, is that in the Cave of Mammon. In canto vii Guyon is without the palmer, and the simile that expresses his state is that of a pilot who can no longer see his way or the steadfast star he steers by, but keeps steady by the compass of his own knowledge of himself and of the right. Knowledge must steady the eye; it is this that brings Guyon safely out of the cave. Mammon's persuasion ends in the words "Come thou, and see" what is hidden from heaven's eye, and as he walks through the cave Guyon gazes, "Did feed his eyes, and fild his inner thought" (vii, 24). That this has to do with the sin of *curiositas* would be generally agreed; the point would seem to be that Guyon does not succumb to this sin and does not fall into the power of the fiend which stalks at his heels. If Acrasia relates to the flesh, what St. John calls the lust of the flesh, Mammon, "God of the world and worldlings," relates to the world, St. John's lust of the eyes; and this is precisely what Guyon does not give way to. The fiend will take him

If ever covetous hand, or lustfull eye,
Or lips he layd on thing that likte him best.
(vii, 27)

But Guyon does not lust, he "feeds" his eyes and fills his inner thought. From what he sees here, he sharpens his inner vision; instead of lusting he learns to see better. Nor does he sleep, for that too would destroy him (the gate of Sleep is close to Mammon's, on the other side of the gates of hell) until he returns to the upper world. What he is seeing in Mammon's cave, the poet tells us, is more riches than eye of man, "living eye," has ever seen, yet he disregards it by deliberately conjuring up before his eyes another sight:

Another blis before mine eyes I place,
Another happines, another end.
(vii, 33)

"Eye" and "eyes" are repeated during Guyon's walk through the Bower of Bliss. The gate to the bower is of ivory, inlaid with gold and vermeil to present with the greatest possible vividness the destructive yet exciting passion of the other enchantress Medea. The emphasis on lifelikeness in describing a work of art is usual in Spenser as in other writers of the Renais-

sance and of the classical world. Often it seems, as here, to be an exploration of the kind of reality a work of art has. "Ye might have seene the frothy billowes fry," "yt seemd thenchaunted flame," such phrases are familiar. But Spenser here as elsewhere seems to be fascinated by the way the materials of the work of art in some sense become that which they represent.⁸ The ivory *is* the waves, the waves *are* ivory, yet they are also waves:

That seemd the waves were into yvory,
Or yvory into the waves were sent;

(xii, 45)

The vermeil appears as blood, the gold as flame, without ceasing to be themselves. So vital a work of visual art can image for us the truth of Medea's story. But the vitality can be used, also, to make us see only certain aspects of that story, only part of the truth. Acrasia's gateway expresses the emotional excitement, the wild cruel beauty, the rich excess which is there in the vermeil blood, the golden flames; and rouses the senses to a lustful indulgence which reduces man to beast as it did Medea. Similarly in Book III Malecasta's tapestry depicting the death of Adonis turns it from a tragic myth into a titillating and sentimentally sexual picture of a prettily dying boy and a weeping woman. The Medea gate works upon us like the "guilefull semblants" which Acrasia's false Genius "makes us see" (xii, 48), and like the extensive and subtle seductive use, throughout the garden, of things made by art but pretending to be real, so that which is natural and living and that which is made out of dead but rich materials are confounded in the senses, and the whole place brings about a state of mind in which art (the art by which Acrasia deadens nature through a hothouse intensification) seems to be more natural than nature itself. The means by which nature and fullness of life are heightened are in fact the means by which vitality and health are destroyed, the foe of life, like Genius.

As Guyon goes on, we see the Bower by degrees, and by degrees we see what it is. Guyon is wondering and interested, as he was in Mammon's cave, but he will not let its delight sink into his sense, and he looks "still forward right," passing the trees which are like a gate, as the ivory gate was like a sea, and the grapes like rubies and emeralds and the fruit of gold like grapes, and the golden ivy. All pleasures offer themselves "to his sober eye" (xii, 58), but his only moment of weakness comes when the wanton maidens present their parody of the birth of the great goddess of love by ducking and bobbing in the fountain, revealing their spoils to "greedy eyes" (64). The palmer has to rebuke "those wandring eyes of his" (69) and hurries him on without further danger to the sight of Acrasia, feeding her eyes, in a sense quite other than Guyon's in the cave, on the sleeping Verdant:

With her false eyes fast fixed in his sight,
As seeking medicine whence she was stong,
Or greedily depasturing delight.

(73)

She kisses Verdant's eyes, feeding on them, sucking his spright through them. Eyes are important still a few stanzas later. Acrasia's breast is bare "to ready spoyle/ Of hungry eies, which n'ote there with be fild," and it is her own promising eyes, thrilling the heart yet never satisfying it, which most hopelessly entrap her victims. It is appropriate that the whole place, with its enormous powers of seduction based upon an appeal to the eye, its skill at arousing without ever appeasing, should be broken down. The greedy eye can no longer be tempted there.

The legend of Chastity, as inevitably as the sonnets, is concerned with the right seeing of love. Malecasta's tapestry, which shows to her people so distorted a vision of the nature of love, is at the same time a picture of the nature of the castle and the castle's mistress. The tapestry Venus, like Malecasta, knows only lust, though she prettifies it with expressions of profounder passion. Like Acrasia she searches Adonis's naked limbs "with her two crafty spyas." Britomart and her companions view the whole place and its occupants "with scornefull eye," yet it is here that Britomart is superficially wounded by the arrow of Gardante, the looking of sexual desire. The reason presumably is that, on seeing Artegall in the magic globe, she had for a time been confused as to the meaning of her desire for him, and had seen herself as a monster of unnatural lust, whereas in reality, as Merlin tells her, it was not the "wandring eye" of lust or of passing fancy, but a glance guided by divine intention, that showed Artegall to her, and showed him not as a physical body merely, but as a whole person whose appearance in the mirror of truth expresses his inner reality and value. Merlin's knowledge of Britomart's destiny comes from the wisdom which clears his sight; telling Britomart of the future of her race and her descendants, he speaks as if it were being presented visibly both to himself and to her:

Behold the man! and tell me, Britomart,
If ay more goodly creature thou didst see.
(III.iii.32)

He breaks off overwhelmed, as if he is by "other ghastly spectacle dismayd,/ That secretly he saw yet note discoure" (50). Britomart, the child of destiny, moves in an atmosphere of vision. The mirror of truth starts her on her quest, and she is dedicated through the visionary prophecy of Merlin and later through her own dream vision in the Temple of Isis. For most of her story, she is unaffected by the wandering eye of desire, but she meets others who carry the trivial sexuality of Malecasta to a point of greater harm and human destruction. The seduction of Hellenore by Paridell is conducted through the eye, just as is the communication of true love; as they dine Paridell feeds his fill on her face, and she "in his eye his meaning wisely redd," and answers him in kind. The welcome wound of lust passes through Paridell's eyes, as it so often has, and meanwhile Malbecco, watching all his guests warily, to intercept gliding glances, misses Paridell's practiced con-

duct through the accident that Paridell sits on his host's blind side. Through the flexible visual tradition of love and desire, Spenser defines economically and vividly the kind of relationships that exist between these three, and he draws attention to it pointedly in these two stanzas, where an address to Love, and a play upon some of the various meanings the Renaissance saw in his bandaged eyes, leads to the role of eyes throughout this beautifully developed incident:

False Love, why do men say thou canst not see,
And in their foolish fancy feigne thee blinde,
That with thy charmes the sharpest sight doest binde,
And to thy will abuse? Thou walkest free,
And seest every secret of the minde;
Thou seest all, yet none at all sees thee;
All that is by the working of thy deitee.

So perfect in that art was Paridell,
That he Malbeccoes halfen eye did wyle;
His halfen eye he wiled wondrous well,
And Hellenors both eyes did eke beguyle,
Both eyes and hart attonce, during the while
That he there sojourned his woundes to heale.

(x, 4-5)

The eye, which can be the instrument of the greatest of man's capacities, love, insight, wisdom, can also be the tool by which the total selfishness and irresponsible inhumanity of Paridell, Hellenore, and Malbecco can lead to the debasing of them all. In contrast, Britomart goes through Busyrane's house like Guyon in the cave, using her eyes to know, learn, judge; to see and know and yet abstain. Like Guyon she wonders, and cannot satisfy her greedy eyes as she gazes, trying to experience and understand the whole of this rich, silent, menacing place. She "backward cast her busie eye,/ To search each secrete of that goodly sted" (xii, 50). Amoret has done none of this; seeing the masque of Cupid she accepted it at its face value and became a part of Busyrane's house, forced to endure a phantasmal and yet real suffering which she can escape only when Britomart, having used her eyes to learn and so control, shows her that what she "sees" and endures is not really there.

Similar uses of sight are present in succeeding books of the poem, and I should like finally only to point to some passages in which different aspects of the metaphor are exploited. In the book of Friendship, for example, there is the magnificent and wholly Elizabethan pageant of the marriage of Thames and Medway which expresses through a glorious and ordered visual experience that which is seen by the inner eye when the poet contemplates the physical form of Britain. It is not in any sense a description of the geography of the country; the attending rivers do have different visual attributes, but these, though lovingly accurate, are general and characterizing, suggesting

the rich variety of those rivers, mountains, people, which through concord are made one in Elizabeth's realm:

The chaulky Kenet, and the Thetis gray,
The morish Cole, and the soft sliding Breane,
The wanton Lee, that oft doth loose his way.
(IV, xi, 29)

The sea, as much a part of the nature and richness of Spenser's Britain as the hills and plains and rivers, further expresses the joyous life of concorded difference:

Light foote Cymothoe, and sweete Melite,
Fairest Pherusa, Phao lilly white, . . .
(xi, 49)

Contemplating his vision of what his country's life is and means, the poet breaks into the wonder and delight which captures for us the heart of what he is showing us in his imaginative visual geography, the movement, the creative life, the eternal energy:

O what an endlesse worke have I in hand,
To count the seas abundant progeny—
(xii, 1)

This is one of Spenser's finest uses of a visual effect in which what may be physically seen—the Stoure flowing through Blandford plains, the Yar softly washing against the walls of Norwich, the turrets along the Thames, the still Darent, and the stately Severne—is so seen by the poet as to become at once a river flowing into other rivers and eventually to the sea as a pregnant image of the life of Britain, and a presence with human characteristics and connotations. It is Spenser's peculiar distinction (shared in part by William Collins, for all the distance in time) that he can create beings for whom the term "personification" is an absurd inadequacy. The creatures of this celebratory pageant have an existence which cannot be defined in single terms. The Liffy, Slane, Kenet, Medway, are seen by our inner eye as at once rivers and beings in human shape who make visible the human meanings of such rivers; gray eyed Doris and swift Proto, the names piling upon one another, are nymphs whose flowing movement is the waves of the sea.

After so dazzling a tour de force it is a drop in intensity to come to Book V's use of sleepless sight as part of man's workaday effort to judge and act rightly, but such wary carefulness is entirely appropriate to Spenser's justice. The giant of canto ii does not train his physical sight to the point where to see outwardly is to see inwardly, to understand the thing seen:

'Of things unseene how canst thou deeme aright,'
Then answered the righteous Artegall,
'Sith thou misdeem'st so much of things in sight?'
(ii, 39)

When Britomart is trapped by treachery in Dolon's house, her address to her guilty sleeping eyes, the "false watches" which have almost betrayed her, sets up a poignant relationship between the wakefulness of the longing earthly lover and the eyes' failure, like that of the disciples, to watch for the greater love of Christ:

Now will ye sleepe? ah! wake, and rather weepe,
To thinke of your nights want, that should yee waking keepe.
(vi, 25)

It is the book of Courtesy, however, that has one of the greatest of all Spenser's visions. The dance of the Graces is one of those sights which one cannot choose to see, but which may be vouchsafed to the sensitive eye, Merlin's, Britomart's, Arthur's, the poet Colin's. This is the vision on which the whole poem is built, the vision of the world as music, dance, disciplined yet spontaneous order; this Colin and Spenser can see, and can show, however fleetingly, to Calidore and to us. The final gift of the Graces, who "all gracious gifts bestow," is the gift of the poet's sight, truest of all human seeing, that which transforms our daily sight into vision. This we cannot see by our own choice, but we can train our eyes to the point where the vision which is given to the poet is displayed to the reader.

And at the close, in the Cantos of Mutabilitie, the difference and the relation between the seeing of the bodily eye and the seeing of the mind unfolds before us in its cosmic form. What we see, Spenser says in the first stanza, is mutability, "the ever-whirling Wheele/ Of Change." It was not always so, even to the bodily sight, for once there was visible stability, peace, order. But now we see change and decay, and we cannot see it with the mind's eye because of its distressing power over the carnal sight. We cannot interpret it, as we cannot interpret the goddess Nature; male and female, beauty and terror, life and death, become to us meaningless contradictions, not a rich paradoxical unity. Nature is "Unseene of any, yet of all beheld" (VII, vii, 13): we see, yet we have not eyes to see, save "like an image in a glass." Mutability makes her case with processions; she sees in them only facts, yet despite herself her pageants present, to the inner eye, the meaning of those facts, and that meaning undermines her visual evidence. Her last figure is Death, and on this Spenser expends those resources which six books of variation on the metaphor of sight have built up:

And after all came Life, and lastly Death:
Death with most grim and griesly visage seene,
Yet is he nought but parting of the breath;
Ne ought to see, but like a shade to weene,
Unbodied, unsoul'd, unheard, unseene:
But Life...

(VII, 46)

All that we can ever see is Life, and against its lusty beauty Death becomes

what it is, something unseen and unexperienced, the ceasing of life. We think we see "Death" but it is a specter of our fears and fantasy. The human muddle about what seeing is, is flatly stated by the endlessly uncomprehending Mutability:

For what we see not, who shall us perswade?
(vii, 49)

After the magnificent articulation of the metaphor in *Mutabilitie*, the poem's close is wholly fitting, in its ardent prayer that the poet's efforts may at last be granted the gift of an absolute purity of eye, all our human optical illusions over:

O that great Sabbaoth God graunt me that Sabaoths sight!

NOTES

1. John B. Bender, *Spenser and Literary Pictorialism* (Princeton, 1972); Forrest G. Robinson, *The Shape of Things Known: Sidney's Apology in Its Philosophical Tradition* (Cambridge, Mass., 1972).

2. I have investigated this in "Vision and Rhetoric: The Poet's Voice in *The Faerie Queene*," *ELH*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (March, 1969), 131-144.

3. Mr. Robinson's book cited above gives an account of the history of the metaphor in philosophic tradition.

4. E. H. Gombrich, "Botticelli's Mythologies," *Symbolic Images* (London, 1972) p. 33, p. 44.

5. Robinson, *Shape of Things Known*, p. 107.

6. Gombrich, "Icones Symbolicae," *Symbolic Images*, p. 154.

7. William Blake, Letter to Trusler, August 23, 1799.

8. This and other examples are discussed in Bender, *Spenser and Literary Pictorialism*.